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Rebuilding the Idea of the Commons

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rebuilding the idea of the commons

We need people for planning as much as #planning4people, says **Geraint Ellis**

The TCPA's #Planning4People initiative is important for a whole host of reasons, many of which may be self-evident for readers of *Town & Country Planning*; but let me emphasise what I think are its most critical attributes.

First of all, it reminds us – upfront – that the way we organise our built environment is essential to our collective wellbeing and is a key component of a good society, and plays a major role in health, access to schools, mobility, affordable housing, and so on. The spatial layout of our settlements and countryside can humanise, protect and nurture some of the values that are almost unanimously recognised as being central to our quality of life. However, while issues of education, health, climate change and children's welfare are clearly recognised as deserving priority attention, the way in which these are framed by political opinion, public attitudes and economic narratives tends to overlook how we can address them in the most efficient, equitable and effective way.

All these challenges share the common feature that ultimately they deal with collective goods (air pollution, open spaces, public transport, etc.), deliver collective benefits, and therefore require collective organisation and delivery. The market cannot effectively deal with such issues and to ensure that we are all better off we must recognise that a stronger, more proactive planning system is instrumental in attending to many of these issues. Yet it is increasingly overlooked, marginalised and under-valued. The #Planning4People Manifesto reminds us that we are all in this together and is therefore as much about the basics of how we organise society as about a defensive campaign in favour of the idea of planning.

Second, the Manifesto emphasises that the fundamental reason why we have a planning system is not to provide an administrative process for organising development, but to contribute to a range of ultimate outcomes such as safe neighbourhoods, prosperous local economies, affordable housing, and an environment that supports good health. It is these outcomes that therefore should be the ultimate criteria for judging how well our planning system (and, indeed, perhaps the government system as a whole) is performing, and not just questions of how long it takes to make planning decisions and how to further streamline another part of the bureaucratic process. The #Planning4People Manifesto thus calls on us to reflect on what we value most about our neighbourhoods, regions and society, and by implication, to ensure that we focus on how best to deliver these through planning and other forms of activity.

Third, the Manifesto highlights the role that planning (in its broadest sense) can play in delivering many of the outcomes discussed above. Unfortunately, what has become the 'conventional'

discourse of planning, as projected by recent governments and now becoming embedded in the public psyche, is one in which planning is predominantly considered a problem or a burden. This, more than anything, has prompted the need for the #Planning4People initiative, as a reaction to the vicious circle of narrative framing that is now applied to any planning action seeking to make a positive social intervention (i.e. planning seen as an ‘anti-market’ activity).

A recent and recurring example of this is how the shortage of housing is blamed on planning, rather than on the broader failures caused by arrangements over tax and finance, the rental market and the profit-seeking behaviour of developers and landowners (as highlighted recently in the excellent report by Michael Edwards of UCL¹). Indeed, it is planning’s potential to improve people’s lives that has attracted many of the best people into the profession – and which, if more effectively asserted, can continue to motivate people to see planning as a solution, not a problem.

Fourth, the #Planning4People Manifesto reminds us that planning should be fully embedded in the democratic process. This is implicitly based on the strong assertion that we should be planning for all sections of society, and particularly for the most vulnerable. However, as noted above, the way in which planning is now most commonly discussed in the media and in political discourse reflects the perspective of very particular, powerful political and economic interests that see the planning system as a threat.

Finally, and particularly close to home for someone who works in academia, the Manifesto calls for a transformation in planning education and research to ensure that graduates have the appropriate skills in community development, and to ensure that we have better evidence on the social consequences of planning decisions. I do not think I can offer a counter-argument to this. This is indeed badly needed, yet rarely demanded – not because it is not recognised, but because of the priorities of the institutions that employ our graduates, the way that our courses are constrained through the demands of professional accreditation, and the way in which funding for research is increasingly shaped by its ability to contribute to economic growth.

However, while I would strongly endorse the demands made in the #Planning4People Manifesto, we need to think a bit more sharply about how we can possibly realise them. Diagnosis of problems is one thing, but a successful path of action is significantly more challenging – and depressing in its complexity. Antipathy to planning and the collective values upon which it is based has been growing for many decades, accompanied by the rise and rise of neo-liberalism. While there are other contributing factors (including the failure of planning initiatives), it is the grip of this ideology, its apparent translation into conventional ‘common sense’ and the power of the interests that gain so much from it that are at the heart of the issue. But we should neither be overwhelmed by this, nor simply curse the darkness and call for the collapse of international free-market capitalism; rather,

we should understand what can be reasonably achieved through a campaign aimed at buttressing planning's role in a progressive society.

The #Planning4People Manifesto highlights a number of sensible calls to change local and national policies, laws and duties; but we should recognise that, without a consideration of the wider dynamics influencing the direction of society, such changes will merely scratch the surface and have rather short-term effects. We need to think a bit more widely about how we demand the changes that would really make a difference, with a particular emphasis on the role of the wider public.

I can provide an illustration of this from the city and region I now call home, Belfast and Northern Ireland. As many readers will know, the Northern Ireland planning system has undergone a major change over the last six months which has seen planning responsibilities transferred back to locally elected councils, after 40 years of being overseen by central government with minimal direct democratic control. Local democratic control of planning is, of course, the normal arrangement in virtually every European state and beyond, based on the premise that direct accountability over how places evolve is the most effective approach to making such important decisions. By implication one would expect that that the mini-revolution we have witnessed in Northern Ireland would transform the practice, style and objectives of the planning system.

While it is still early days, from what we have seen so far the transfer of responsibilities is having a very subdued impact on such issues. To generalise, it seems we have largely continued with the same system, in which planners still do not seem particularly happy to engage with the public, politicians still complain about how planning is holding back economic development, and the public still has little interest in the planning system.

It is the role of the public that is most critical here, as we cannot rely on planners and politicians to deliver the things we want unless we demand them. Indeed, while much effort went into training Northern Ireland's politicians and planners for institutional change, there was virtually no effort made to prime the public on how they could make the most of the new system. In other words, planning was primarily seen as an administrative function, not a political one. This highlights that while clearly we need to convince those in power of the virtues and benefits of fairer and more progressive planning, we may also need to do more to activate greater and wider grassroots understanding and support for planning and the benefits it can bring.

I see parallels here with recent shifts in how we understand our responses to the enormous challenge of climate change. We have all the scientific evidence we need to persuade us that we must take urgent and drastic action to avoid devastating consequences in the years to come, yet the global political system still appears incapable of making the commitments required; indeed, November sees the 21st consecutive meeting of world governments still seeking to secure a meaningful course of action. Faced with such political paralysis, it is not surprising that there are increasing calls for more

populist direct action on climate change, as people all around the world become increasingly frustrated by the inability of governments to act in their long-term interest.

This has been documented effectively by Naomi Klein's most recent book and film,² in which she suggests that the climate crisis is now so serious, so entwined with dominant world views and systems of production and consumption, that hope is shifting from a reliance on governments to wider resistance through mass social movements, which range from the First Nation peoples' protest against tar sands extraction in Alberta to recent campaigns for universities and others to divest from fossil fuels.

Klein does not see the emergence of such movements as being restricted to the climate issue, and recognises that the ultimate cause of the crisis was that we lost sight of what was important and nourishing to human society. As such, Klein calls for these movements to be part of 'a much broader battle of worldviews, a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil and the civic after so many decades of neglect and attack'.

I see the challenges raised by the #Planning4People Manifesto as fitting within such a framework, and potentially to be part of the movement that Klein calls for – indeed, we have some such incipient groups in the UK.³ Thus to realise the objectives of the #Planning4People Manifesto we need to break the rules that have constrained and divided planning from health, transport, tax and economic development objectives and start to see all these elements as part of a wider picture, which only a unifying world view is able to do. In this way it may be possible to convince the public and our politicians that the currently dominant world view has not only put our futures into perilous danger, but has also eroded our ability to build the foundations of a good society.

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Notes

1 *#Planning4People: A Manifesto*. TCPA, Oct. 2015. www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/planning4people.html

2 M. Edwards: *Prospects for Land, Rent and Housing in UK Cities*. Future of Cities: Working Paper. Foresight, Government Office for Science, 2015.

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/440527/15-28-land-rent-housing-uk-cities.pdf

3 N. Klein: *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*. Penguin, 2014

4 For example Planning Democracy (www.planningdemocracy.org.uk/) and Planners Network UK (www.pnuk.org.uk/)

‘We need to think widely about how we demand the changes that would really make a difference, with a particular emphasis on the role of the wider public’